

Agents of Support for Community College Transfer Students: A Qualitative Study

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This qualitative study explored what support community college transfer students relied upon while transitioning to a 4-year university. Investigators examined experiences of 12 full-time degree-seeking students who previously attended a community college. Data included a series of three individual interviews with participants and reflective journals completed by six participants. Two primary agents of support were identified: academic advising and personal support. Participants emphasized active and implied support needs, types, and functions throughout the entire process. By understanding community college transfer students' needs, institutions (agent networks of support) can equip advisors and institutional staff (agents) with the information and resources (functions) that will assist students with a positive transition. We offer implications for advising training and opportunities for collaborative institutional partnerships.

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While community college enrollment has slowly decreased since the Great Recession of 2008 (enrollment peaked at nearly 7.7 million students in 2010), more than 5.7 million students enroll at community colleges yearly (De Brey et al., 2021). Of those, 80% desire to obtain a bachelor's degree (Strempel, 2018), yet only 13% will finish a bachelor's degree within 6 years (Shapiro et al., 2018). Of those who do transfer, many have not completed an associate's degree (Shapiro et al., 2018). While community college enrollment has continued to be high, the rates of students transferring into new institutions has not increased during the last decade, with 1.4 million transfer-in students starting at new institutions (either 4-year institutions or community colleges) each fall (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Faculty member actions; personal factors (e.g., changes in family status and support); staff members and peers; and

perceived problems at the community college (e.g., not having the appropriate prerequisite and necessary major courses needed to stay on track) all influence early transfer decisions (Cejda & Kaylor, 2001). Regardless of when a student decides to transfer to a baccalaureate institution, research has shown that receiving early assistance with transition planning increases likelihood of degree persistence (Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Tovar, 2015).

The difficulties transfer students experience during their transition to 4-year institutions include: less financial aid (Melguizo et al., 2011), less engagement (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2019), and transfer and culture shock from changes in cultures and academics (Ishitani, 2008). Scholars have reasons why students transfer (Cejda & Kaylor, 2001; Fee et al., 2009) including the academic performance and student engagement of native and transfer students (Conrad Glass, Jr. & Harrington, 2002; Ditchkoff et al., 2003; Woosley & Johnson, 2006). However, unlike standard reporting for first-year student retention, no national standards or benchmarks document transfer student success. Attempts have been made to identify characteristics that support transfer student persistence to graduation. For example, the National Student Clearinghouse Signature Report (Shapiro et al., 2017) examined four metrics for assisting community college transfer students in completing a bachelor's degree: characteristics of the starting institution, student characteristics, characteristics of the 4-year institutions, and the distributions of in and out-of-state transfers. A recent study found credit transferability was a significant factor in deciding where to transfer (Tobolowsky & Bers, 2019), supporting previous studies describing administrators' perceptions that students shopped for colleges and decided to transfer based on articulation agreements (McGowan & Gawley, 2006). Articulation agreements between two institutions determine how credit will be received from one institution to another (D'Amico et al., 2021).

Social support is critical to student success, particularly for transfer students. Without proper support, transfer students experience confusion

about university cultural norms and expectations and are unsure about university processes, policies, and procedures (McGowan & Gawley, 2006). This support may be from intentional peer contact (Fulton & O'Brien, 2016) or within orientation programs, mentoring, and transfer-specific programming (Martinez, 2018). Programmatic supports—academic advising, social support programs, and orientation programs—can all be effective when they recognize transfer students are a heterogeneous population (Archambault, 2016; Hatch & Garcia, 2017).

Functions of support for community college transfer students include those related to emotional, practical, and campus capital (Shaw & Chin-Newman, 2017). The extant literature offers few studies that explore the necessary supports for community college transfer students to transition socially and psychologically (DeWine et al., 2017; Handel & Stempel, 2016; Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Stempel & Handel, 2018). More literature is necessary to understand how community colleges can better support students preparing to transition to a 4-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree (DeWine et al., 2017).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to describe what support structures community college transfer students relied upon in transitioning to a 4-year university. The study is guided by the following research question: What support structures do community college transfer students describe as necessary in their transition to a 4-year university?

Conceptual Framework

This study is framed around necessary social support for community college transfer students. The goal of the conceptual framework, then, is “to categorize and describe concepts relevant” (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009, p. 122) to social support, which has been studied across academic disciplines and through a variety of dimensions. Some scholars identify attributes or functions of social support (Hinson Langford et al., 1997); others have examined the persons or agents of social support (Grutzik & Ramos, 2016; Museus & Neville, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1994). Understanding functions of social support and the people who provide it is important to structuring a system of support.

Scholars describe functions of support in different ways. Hinson Langford and colleagues (1997) outlined four attributes including providing empathy (emotional), lending tangible assistance

with goods and/or services (instrumental), giving information to facilitate problem-solving (informational), and providing tools for the individual to self-evaluate (appraisal). Others categorize functions of support as affect (i.e., emotional expressions one provides), affirmation (i.e., the degree to which one agrees with appropriateness of some act), aid (i.e., providing of money, goods, information, or time), and honest feedback (Anderson et al., 2012). Whether described as an attribute or function, the primary characteristic of each lies in the provision of something perceived to positively impact the receiver of support.

Scholars have also examined agents of support, that is, those who provide support. For example, Kahn and Antonucci (1980) described agents of support as convoys, or groups of people with specified roles in concentric circles surrounding an individual, with the closest convoys providing the largest supportive relationships. Those who are closest, often close family and friends, do not change over time. Meanwhile, those in outer rings of the convoy, such as friends, extended family, and coworkers, may change. The impact of social support also depends on the quantity of support, its structure, and the function it serves (House & Kahn, 1985). Where a support resides within the convoy, along with the structure and function of that support, will play a variable role on the impact to the individual. Building on this, Anderson et al. (2012) outlined four agent networks of support: intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions/communities. Research demonstrates that strong familial support systems, in particular positive parental support, positively impact adjustment during transition (Holahan et al., 1994; Levine, 1972), and that “social relationships have the strongest influence on whether someone can adapt positively to adversity” (Afifi, 2018, p. 5).

Although supporting students within academic advising is not new (Hatch & Garcia, 2017; Maliszewski Lukszo & Hayes, 2020), social support as a framework for assisting community college transfer students is unexplored. Institutions, as agents of support, have a responsibility to cultivate a culture for student belonging (Grutzik & Ramos, 2016). This support can be enacted by agents (i.e., people at both the program and individual advisor levels). For instance, academic advisors might connect students to the appropriate campus resources based on their individual needs (Museus & Neville, 2012). While social support among college freshmen can predict academic

achievement (DeBerard et al., 2004), evidence also suggests the importance of support extends to community college students, particularly those preparing to transfer (Flaga, 2006).

As agent networks of support, institutions can offer students formal structures of social support within three environments: academic, social, and physical. Such connections, through formal structures (e.g., counseling centers, orientation programs, and academic advising) and relationships with others, bolster social support (Flaga, 2006). These structures also improve satisfaction, particularly when students know graduation requirements before transferring or receive advice from faculty or staff members about transferring (Berger & Malaney, 2003).

Social support research reveals two dimensions that, when considered together, comprise a structure through which agents can develop and maintain a support system. This support structure includes attributes and functions (the *what*) as well as the agent of support (the *who*). Development of an effective system of support lies in the agent's understanding and capacity to translate that understanding into coordinated action. It is important that institutions, as agents, understand the range of attributes/functions of support they ought to provide. The same holds true for academic advisors who, as individuals, represent the institution as agent.

Methodology

To capture the meaning of the transition for community college transfer students to a 4-year university, we employed a basic qualitative design, commonly found in applied fields such as education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research provides a voice for participants, allowing researchers and readers a window into understanding the subjective meaning of participants' experiences. A qualitative design was chosen to better understand necessary agents and structures of support to improve students' college experiences and persistence to their degrees.

The study was conducted at a large Midwest research-intensive institution with approximately 25,000 students. Of the 850 transfer students enrolling each fall, half come from community colleges. The site is the first author's home institution and thus, the institution was selected for convenience (Patton, 2014), but it also allowed the researcher an "understanding of the world in which they live and work" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). Advising is centrally coordinated and

decentrally delivered (i.e., campus-wide advising planning but with each college implementing specific advising practices and models). Each college also has a transfer-specific advising contact. Although some programs have established pathway programs, articulation agreements are not established at the campus-level.

Participants were full-time, degree-seeking transfer students from a community college who had completed a minimum of 12 semester credits at their previous institution (for classification and admissions purposes, transfer students must have 12 postsecondary credits completed). To recruit participants, a promotional flyer was given to all transfer students who attended an in-person new student enrollment day. After the university's census date, the registrar's office provided a list of transfer students enrolled full-time. Potential students were emailed at the end of the second week with instructions on how to participate. Of the 20 students who responded, five did not meet the criteria for inclusion, and three did not respond to follow-up requests for meetings.

In total, 12 students completed the required interview process and six of those completed the optional journaling process. Participant demographics aligned proportionally to the overall demographics of transfer students at this institution. In total, 36 interviews (27.2 hours of recordings) and 65 journal entries were obtained (see Table 1).

To incentivize participation, students entered a drawing for one of two \$50 gift cards if they participated in the interviews and an additional \$25 drawing for journaling.

The interview protocol (Appendix) was constructed from the transfer literature and vetted with the first author's dissertation chair and committee members. A pilot interview was conducted with four students, revealing the students' experiences from their time at community college until transfer. Thus, no significant changes to the interview protocol were necessary. The first interview, conducted during the second month of the first semester at the university, explored the process leading up to the transfer and transition to the new institution (i.e., how students came to the decision to transfer and the timeline of their transfer experience). The timing of the first interview was intentional, as this period is a critical period for retention of college students (Tinto, 1998). The second interview, conducted during the third month of the semester, focused on steps participants took after arriving (specifically, who helped them in the

Table 1. Participant Information

Name	Academic Major	Age at transfer	Ethnicity	Class Standing	Previous Community College
Jefferson	Electrical Engineering	21	Latinx/White	Junior	In-state
Anastazia	Animal Science	21	Hispanic	Senior	In-state
Elizabeth	History	21	White	Junior	In-state
Max	Biological Sciences	22	White	Junior	Out-of-state
Mya	Hospitality, Restaurant and Tourism Management	23	African American	Junior	In-state
Nadine	Pre-Spanish Education	23	White	Junior	In-state
Clark	Psychology	24	Preferred not to answer	Sophomore	Out-of-state
Tom	Political Science	25	White	Junior	In-state
Nicholas	Business Administration	25	White	Senior	In-state
Jean	English	25	White	Junior	In-state
Suzy	Supply Chain Management	30	White	Senior	In-state
Ronnie Lea	Child, Youth and Family Studies	41	White	Senior	Out-of-state

transition and what resources they utilized throughout their experience). Additionally, participants were invited to elaborate on their first interview. The final interview, completed in the last month of the participants' first semester, focused on member checking to determine the extent to which the interpretations resonated and allowed students to reflect on their overall transition experience.

A secondary form of data, participants' journaling, was also solicited throughout the semester. The journaling served two purposes: to better understand student transition experiences between interviews and to serve as a form of data triangulation (Saldaña, 2011). The activity was intentionally unstructured, allowing participants to provide unfiltered commentary. The main directive encouraged participants to consider their university orientation experience and other events geared toward transfer students (e.g., individual meetings with advisors, admissions, and financial aid officers). Participants were instructed to send weekly journals. The six participants' 66 entries had a collective word count of 14,264.

Each interview was coded before conducting the next using open and axial coding. Open coding begins with a "summarizing phrase for a piece of text which expresses the meaning of the fragment" (Boeije, 2010, p. 96). Transcripts were read multiple times and a line-by-line textual analysis determined whether the statements were meaningful to the transition process. Codes were assigned and compared as the first author reviewed the data. Through open coding, important concepts

emerged. Using axial coding, he "reassembl[ed] data that were fractured during open coding" to "form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 124). Participant journal entries were also coded and used to finalize the interview guide for the third and final interview. The third interview coding consisted primarily of selective coding, which focuses on "connections between the categories in order to make sense of what is happening" (Boeije, 2010, p. 114).

In addition to multiple interviews and a secondary data source, various methods of validity were used: data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Triangulation uses multiple forms of data to ensure validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study used three rounds of interviews with each participant and journals from six of them. Moreover, the third interview provided an opportunity for member checking, which "consists of taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and narrative account" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Peer debriefing, working with someone who is "familiar with the research or the phenomenon being explored," (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129) was also incorporated. A success coach working with transfer students and the second author served as peer reviewers by providing support but also critically evaluating the work of the first author by challenging the findings and probing for deeper meaning, more meaningful

explanations, or new interpretations. Reviewers found no major discrepancies, which gave the first author additional confidence in the coding analysis and findings.

Findings: Agents of Support

Participants relied upon a wide variety of support structures during their transition. Many emphasized the need for active and implied support at the community college and university levels throughout the transition process. The analysis identified two primary support agents. The first, academic advising, was time-oriented (e.g., pre-transfer and posttransfer advising). The second, personal relationships, was function-oriented (e.g., financial support, emotional support). Participants addressed their perceptions of the functions that each structure served and the agents who provided the support.

Agent 1: Academic Advising

The primary need for support, discussed at length by participants, was academic advising. Students specifically discussed advising within the context of pretransfer and posttransfer timeframes.

Pretransfer Advising

All participants identified advising as critical for an effective transition, but many had mixed experiences with individual advisors at their community colleges. Some believed advisors used an instruction manual for advising instead of seeing them as individuals with unique experiences. Some participants expressed skepticism about how well-connected their community college advisors were to advisors at their receiving institutions to ensure that they were provided with the right information. For instance, Nicholas attended two community colleges, and his advising experiences marred his view of advising. He lamented receiving conflicting information about courses that would transfer. Ronnie Lea described a breakdown in communication between advisors at the different institutions:

You have somebody as a go-between over there, but that's one person that doesn't necessarily have all the information that happens between that campus and here...to bridge that is tough to do. They always say, "You're going to want to talk to the advisors over there." So they're gonna send you over here.

Others, like Max, believed advisors at both the sending and receiving institutions were "very interconnected. Even if I go to my advisor and they can't help me, some other advisor will be able to, for sure. I'm positive." Clark said his community college advisor "was the best I had, but the ones who took over for her would help me enroll in classes if I needed help." Similarly, Jean focused on ensuring her credits would transfer so she could earn her degree within a year. Both Clark and Jean viewed the advising process as being primarily transactional, concerned with course registration and degree completion.

Posttransfer Advising

Participants viewed the advisor role differently posttransfer. The first experience of university advising was the transferring of course credits. Participants anticipated courses they completed would transfer, but they did not know how they would apply to their bachelor's degrees. Participants were sometimes surprised by the lengthy transfer course evaluation process. Some were at the end of the first semester trying to determine how some of their credits would count toward their degree requirements. Ronnie Lea said, "Trying to figure out my classes has been a bit confusing [but] thank goodness for my advisor. He has been extremely helpful, and I think I finally figured out just the right set of classes." Like Clark and Jean, who commented on their community college advisors, Ronnie Lea's impression of the academic advising process was primarily transactional: She was satisfied knowing how her transfer courses counted toward her degree and had some sense of security knowing she was in courses that would count toward her degree completion.

Elizabeth did not use an advisor regularly at the community college, but she heeded the advice of others as she transitioned to the new institution. She was told to meet with advisors to "build a relationship. . . . It's an adjustment to always meet with an advisor, but it's nice that I can have a support group that will keep me on track." Elizabeth placed an emphasis on being "on the right track" and mentioned one of the primary benefits of academic advising: having a relationship with a caring institutional representative. Meanwhile, Anastazia received a list of courses to take and therefore, did not feel the need to meet with an advisor. Over time, she found that the advising relationship could be deeper and more personal. Early in her first

semester, Anastazia's dog died, and her advisor helped her to process her feelings. She discovered that academic advising can be a much deeper support structure than simply ensuring students are in appropriate classes for a timely graduation.

Agent 2: Personal Support

The second primary agent, personal support, was function-oriented, consisting of financial and emotional functions. Personal support varied by individuals both in the people giving support and the functions they provided. Unlike advising, for which participants expressed mixed emotions, perceptions of personal support had relatively consistent positive experiences, which aided their transitions.

Familial Functions

Specifically, family members played critical roles in the transition, but those roles and types of support varied among participants. For some, family members provided financial support. For instance, Mya's mother worked on campus, so Mya benefitted through employee scholarship. Suzy lived rent-free with her parents while attending school.

In most situations, however, the support was not financial. Two participants had children and relied on family members for childcare. Ronnie Lea described the support she received from her child and how important it was for her to model being a student:

I tell him every day, "Have a good day at school." I pick him up, "How was your day?" He does the same to me. He is learning from me that it's never too late to go to school. . . . We sit down and do homework together. . . . It's a constant motivation when I'm struggling.

Nearly all participants noted that without familial support of their decision to finish their bachelor's degree, they would have reconsidered. Clark, a military veteran with a combat-related traumatic brain injury, was in a unique situation. He was doing all coursework through distance education because he was out of the country with his wife, who played an important role by keeping him focused: "My wife actually wrote down in her schedule—she's super organized and very schedule-oriented—most of my main assignments that are due just so she could remind me."

Families provided different types of support depending on whether they themselves had attended college. Seven participants had family members who had completed bachelor's degrees and those family members provided a different kind of support. Having attended college herself, Jean's mother helped her review her degree audit to ensure she understood what courses were still needed. On the other hand, because Nicholas was a first-generation college student and his family could not fully understand his experience, they provided emotional support and encouragement. He said, "once I told my family I was finally accepted and I was going here they were like, 'Good. That's really good for ya.' I had all the support I needed."

Friendship Functions

Friends also played different roles for participants. Anastazia's roommate was already a university student, so she had campus knowledge like navigating buses and using the library. Jean discussed the emotional role friends played in her transition, stating that it was "nice knowing that you're not alone in the world. It makes life easier." Tom appreciated comparing his transition experience with a friend who had also transferred to the same institution that semester. Not having studied with anyone during his time at community college, it improved his university experience socially and intellectually. "I was definitely happy when I was able to get to know a couple people well enough to study with them." Friends were an important form of academic support for several participants.

One final function of support that participants discussed was socializing—social nights with roommates, exploring the new city with friends, connecting with friends from similar faith backgrounds, or enjoying activities with friends who also had children attending college. As Jean noted, "Sometimes it's nice to have someone to vent to or someone to go out to coffee with."

Discussion

This study intended to advance the understanding of the community college transfer student experience regarding perceived forms of support (e.g., needs, types, and functions), structures of support (e.g., personal and organizational), and the individual agents who provided support (Anderson et al., 2012). Participants noted that having people encourage them, understand their situation, and

welcome them were crucial to their transition. Many consistently discussed academic advising as one of the most important support structures for students. Affirming previous research (Hinson Langford et al., 1997), academic advisor support fell within two of four attributes: informational (i.e., information to facilitate problem-solving) and appraisal (i.e., tools for the individual to self-evaluate). Participants had mixed experiences; some received poor advice, inaccurate information about transferring course credits, and a lack of personal attention.

Community college students value academic advising more highly than any other institutional support in community colleges (Cuseo, 2012). However, participants left community colleges believing advising was simply about course transfer and registration. As a teaching and learning endeavor, advising is much more complex. Advising has been framed within a tripart model (conceptual, information, and relational; Habley, 1995) that NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising (NACADA, 2017) has adopted and expanded. Participants viewed advisor support as mostly informational and transactional. That many participants perceived community college advising to be lacking corroborates the work of DeWine et al. (2017), which found advising less accessible and less helpful.

It is unclear what challenges community college advisors face to support students planning to transfer. One way to address this is for institutions to better communicate what students can receive from the academic advising process (McGill, 2021). Additionally, feeder and sending institutions can collaborate to ensure accurate course transferability and sequencing information availability. At the institution where this study occurred, articulation agreements were not utilized campus-wide. Courses are all evaluated independently and incorporated into a publicly accessible campus database. In contrast, more than 30 states have policies detailing requirements for transferring core coursework or guaranteed associates degree transfers (Francies & Anderson, 2020). The lack of formal articulation agreements bolsters the need for community college advisors and university advisors at partner institutions to collaborate. Together, they can collate the types of questions and challenges presented to better support students before transferring.

The reliance on family and friends was vital to participants' transfer success (Anderson et al., 2012). Participant Ronnie Lea explicitly mentioned

family as a motivating factor for completing her degree, specifically, modeling the importance of education for her son. In most cases, families provided emotional and instrumental support (Hinson Langford et al., 1997; Rumann, 2010).

Participants also discussed the importance of advisors, the value of friendships, the connection with classmates, and the myriad institutional support service offices across campus. For instance, Ronnie Lea valued her "Life Skills for Success" class, which made her navigate campus and find nine support offices. Jean spoke about the value of her college church group. In another study, conditionally admitted students noted the importance of new supports, particularly a variety of people and places on campus like teachers, new friends, transition classes, and welcome week events (DeVilbiss, 2014). The heterogeneity of community college transfer students helps those who work with them understand the network of support will vary by student.

Support, affirmation, and social integration are needed even when students do not realize the potential benefit, particularly after transferring (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). All participants spoke about the functions of support, particularly as they related to affirming their decision to pursue a bachelor's degree. Findings for the functions of support as emotional (Rumann, 2010) and as a source of connection (DeVilbiss, 2014) upheld previous studies. Participants also mentioned financial, child, or motivational support. Although university activities are important functions of support (Archambault, 2010), participants generally were not involved in campus support organizations, clubs, or extracurricular activities as community college students. While attending community college, few participants knew about such opportunities. Yet, once they transferred, many believed being a student meant more than it had previously. Although participants did not necessarily feel the lack of social integration at the community college led to a poor experience, they discovered that social integration at the 4-year institution helped with their transition. The participant, who lived on-campus at her community college, had the most connections and opportunities for engagement and involvement. While ample literature (e.g., Astin, 1999; Tinto, 1998) underscores connections between engagement and student persistence, data for the present study did not bear out this connection in the transition experience. Participants noted transfer centers and

positive faculty interactions created the sense of being a student at the community college.

Implications

Community college transfer students need appropriate resources, support, and strategies to navigate new systems to be successful at their new institutions. This begins with institutions making transfer students an institutional priority and implementing agents of support. Although some institutions have transfer-specific advisors, many community colleges still have not. One contention is that limited financial resources impede implementation of transfer-specific student support (Schudde et al., 2018). This study supports the need for community colleges to utilize specialized transfer advisors. Within that role, training for those advisors should include generalized understanding of degree requirements for the institutions to which their students predominately transfer. Community college advisors are significant agents in supporting students' future plans, so ensuring they are aware of transfer opportunities is crucial (LaViolet et al., 2018). Academic advising was one of the most discussed supports, yet it was not mandatory for students. Incorporating appropriately structured mandatory transfer advising may positively impact how welcomed a student feels at their new campus (Blekic et al., 2020). Advising-related activities—orientation programs, mentoring, and bringing four-year institution advisors into community colleges—can also increase transfer student success (LaViolet et al., 2018).

This study provides community college faculty members, staff members, and university personnel a rationale for establishing collaborative relationships between sending and receiving institutions. Fostering relationships between students and their new institution and between faculty and staff members at both institutions can facilitate seamless sharing of information and resources. Community colleges should ensure advisors have proper training and resources. Three overarching collaborative efforts that can impact transfer student success include shared goals that positively impact both community colleges and university partners; structured sustainability (e.g., chief academic officers formalize transfer partnerships and programs that will withstand the change of leadership); and embedded maintenance timelines (e.g., regular updates; LaViolet et al., 2018).

The advising function provides a powerful opportunity for transfer students to be educated, supported, and understood during their transition. Community college students expressed desire for supportive advisors who “have time to listen to student needs, impart basic educational planning, provide support beyond academics, accept the student’s cultural background, and understand the family, school, and work responsibilities of their counselees” (Orozco et al., 2010, p. 726). Advisors must also “encourage students to take advantage of all relevant opportunities and identify students in need of additional support” (Archambault et al., 2012, p. 111). Advisors can offer transfer students a safe place to express feelings about the transition process. Questions about student needs can generate discussion: What do you need to be successful in this transition? Who can you reach out to for assistance?

Further, by understanding students’ perceptions of their support circles, advisors can collaboratively develop concrete strategies students can use at any time. Advisors can help students visualize their personal network of support (Kahn & Antonucci, 1980) by identifying people close to them and placing those people within three circles. The innermost circle is for people closest to the individual (e.g., family, friends, and partners) whose connection to the student is stable and lasting over time. The next circle is for those who are role-related yet likely to change over time (e.g., acquaintances and extended family). The outermost layer contains people who serve a particular role related to a specific function in their life. Although advisors will likely be in the outermost layer of most students’ convoys, advisors can help students identify their agents of support, possible connections for the student, and how those connections may vary depending on the closeness to the individual. Beyond understanding who their supports are, advisors and other institutional officers can help students identify what functions of support they need and can guide them in connecting those functions with the agents best suited to meet those needs.

Finally, community colleges can encourage faculty and staff members to engage with students beyond the classroom. This engagement might involve delivering transfer workshops or developing a physical transfer center where prospective transfer students can seek guidance and support while connecting with other prospective transfer students (Cuseo, 2012). DeWine et al. (2017)

posed many important questions to illuminate the transfer student experience:

Are faculty aware of the unique needs of transfer students and the challenges these students experience due to the university's higher academic expectations and the pace of the quarter system? Are faculty aware of how they are perceived by transfer students? Could more student interaction be facilitated by faculty in large classes? (p. 821)

If faculty members can take the educational experience beyond the classroom, students might bolster their identity as community college students and engage more in opportunities.

Limitations and Future Research

The data provided general insights into valuable policies and practices, but deeper exploration is warranted. Transitions and acclimation to campuses and resources take time. Participants were interviewed in the first semester at their receiving institution. Students did not express specific significant obstacles because they may not have understood what they did not know. For instance, while many described being overwhelmed after the orientation experience, they did not express what was overwhelming. In retrospect, this study could have sought to identify what information is most essential at transfer orientation. Furthermore, not all identified supports were utilized supports. Because the study ended before the posting of first-term grades, it is unclear whether their perceptions of the needed support were connected to their ability to be successful.

Future researchers could employ longitudinal designs to study students beyond their first semester or even focus on those who successfully completed their bachelor's degree. Future longitudinal qualitative research (Neale, 2016) could follow community college students throughout the duration of the transfer process. By interviewing students pretransfer, researchers could better understand perceptions of supports while planning to transfer and the reflective value of supports posttransfer. Understanding how support changes over time can ensure institutions are best supporting transfer students from moment of community college entry through graduation from the 4-year university.

Six participants attended the same community college, which narrows the range of experiences captured. Findings for necessary supports may have varied both in function and type with a larger sample of students from other community colleges

in different cities. Additionally, future studies should consider how the impact of part-time enrollment and utilization of agents and functions of support differ compared to full-time students.

Conclusion

Community college transfer students need advising and support to navigate the complexities of higher education. Therefore, universities must enhance transfer student success and support structures (DeWine et al., 2017), and community colleges should enhance their support services to prepare students for a seamless transition into their new institutions. Students who feel advisor concern and know where to find needed resources are more likely to succeed in their new academic environment. An informed and supportive advisor can provide necessary resources to enhance a student's transition experience to a university and improve their overall college experience.

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Appendix. Interview Protocols

First Interview

Interview Overview (repeated each time):

Name: _____

Date, Time, and Location: _____

Other Observations: _____

Interview Purpose:

1. To establish trust and rapport with the participant.
2. To introduce the topic and get initial thoughts on their transition experience.
3. To understand the situation that led up to the transition to [institution].

Interview Procedure:

Before the interview: Ask the participant for permission to tape record the interview. Set up a time that allows for the interview to go long if need be. Set up a place that is quiet with minimal distractions and convenient to the participant, such as a study lounge within the library, an office on campus, or other similar location within the [institution's] campus.

1. Welcome participant.
2. Introduce myself and the research study.
3. Explain the interview process.
 - a. The interview will take approximately one-hour.
 - b. The conversation will be kept confidential.
 - c. I will be tape recording the interview and taking notes, but individual identity will be kept confidential.
 - d. Participant will be provided with a transcript of the interview in order to clarify, add, or edit our interview.
 - e. Participant should select a pseudonym to keep this as confidential as possible.
4. Have participant review and sign the informed consent form.
5. Clarify and review if they have any questions.
6. Begin interview.
7. At end of interview, stop recorder.
8. Thank participant and confirm next interview.

Potential Questions/Topics:

1. Introductions/describe the study.

Note: the following questions are geared toward a more broad understanding of their experience at the previous institution. A more detailed review of their experience at the previous institution will occur in interview two.

2. What school did you transfer from?

Experience at previous institution:

1. Talk about your college background leading up to your enrollment at [institution].
2. What types of things were you involved with at your community college?
 - a. How did you decide to get involved in these things?
3. How did you feel about your experience at your previous institution(s)?

Note: the following questions are geared toward a more broad understanding of their experience in transitioning. A more detailed review of their transition will occur in interview two.

Experience transitioning from previous institution to transfer institution:

1. What is your major?
 - a. How did you decide on your current major?
 - b. Was this your intended major at your previous institution?

2. Which courses did you take for your major at the previous institution?
 - a. How did these courses match with the courses needed at [institution] for graduation?
 - b. Are you satisfied with how your credits transferred in?
3. At what point did you start preparing for your transfer to the new institution and how much time did you devote?
 - a. Was the timing right for you to transfer?
 - b. What was your initial view of the transfer? Was it negative, positive, neutral?
4. What steps did you take in preparing for your transfer?
5. How did you decide that this was the institution to transfer to?
 - a. Did you share your plans with family/friends/ or significant others? If so, how did they feel about your decision?
 - b. How much input did you receive from them while making your decision?
 - c. Did you have any conversations with your professors, advisers, or mentors about your plans to transfer?
6. Did you receive any assistance or guidance regarding transferring?
 - a. How important was it to receive assistance or guidance?
 - b. If receiving guidance is important, who did you want to receive assistance or guidance from?
7. What did you look forward to as you prepared to transfer?
8. What did you dread as you prepared to transfer?
9. What significant people, places, or events (good and/or bad) have been critical throughout your transition?
10. Outside of school, how did you spend your time?

Final Question:

1. Is there anything that I did not ask regarding your transition leading up to arriving at [institution], that you would like me to know?

Second Interview

Interview Overview (repeated each time):

Name: _____
Date, Time, and Location: _____
Other Observations: _____

Interview Purpose:

1. To establish a more clear understanding of the transition
2. To understand the participant's knowledge and use of resources.
3. To understand the participant's perceived support systems.
4. To understand the meaning and importance the student's places within each aspect of the transition and identify the perceived assets and liabilities of each as determined by the participants.

Interview Procedure:

Before the interview: Ask the participant for permission to tape record the interview. Set up a time that allows for the interview to go long if need be. Set up a place that is quiet with minimal distractions and convenient to the participant, such as a study lounge within the library, an office on campus, or other similar location within the [institution's] campus.

1. Welcome participant and thank them for their continued participation.
2. Explain the interview process for the second interview.
 - a. The interview will take approximately one-hour.
 - b. The conversation will be kept confidential.

3. Clarify and review if they have any questions about the study.
4. Begin interview.
 - a. Before starting new questions, ask whether they had anything they wanted to clarify from the first interview with regards to any of their responses.
 - b. Continue interview with new questions.
5. At end of interview, stop recorder.
6. Thank participant and confirm final interview.

Potential Questions/Topics:

High Impact Practices at [institution]

1. What types of things have you heard about that exist at [institution]?
 - a. What things have you chosen to participate in?
 - b. Why have you chosen to participate in/not participate in those things?
2. Did you consider joining the Transfer Student Learning Community?
 - a. If you are participating, why did you decide to enroll in this learning community?
 - b. If not, why did you choose not to enroll in this learning community?
3. Did you consider participating in the Transfer Student-Transitions course?
 - a. If you are participating, why did you decide to enroll in this course?
 - b. If not, why did you choose not to enroll in this course?
4. In any of your classes, have you formed or participated in any group projects or developed any study groups?
 - a. If so, how did you form these study groups?
 - b. Did your experience in these groups impact your overall experience at [institution]? If so, how?
5. Have you had the opportunity to participate in any research (in class or individually)?
 - a. If so, how did this experience come about?
 - b. If not, why have you chosen not to participate in research?
6. Have you participated in any service learning or volunteering while in college either individually or as part of a class, student group, or otherwise?
 - a. If so, how did you learn of these opportunities?
7. Have you participated in or do you plan on participating in any internships?
 - a. If yes, how did you learn about this opportunity? Why did you decide to participate in this opportunity?
 - b. If you plan to participate, how do you intend to determine what internship you will participate in?
8. Is there anything you wish you could have the opportunity to do here at [institution] that is not available to you?

Institutional Support Systems:

1. What types of assistance do you need to be successful (as a student, family member, employee, etc.)?
2. What services exist at [institution] to help transfer students?
 - a. Where do you most often go for assistance?
3. What services did you find most useful? Please elaborate.
4. What services did you not find useful? Please elaborate.
5. Who do you most often consult with for academic guidance? Please elaborate.

Other Support Systems:

1. What most important forms of support (needs, types, and functions) do community college transfer students perceive they need for a successful transition?
2. What is the role and influence of your family as you have transitioned? Friends?
3. With whom do you spend your time?
4. Can you share with me anything about your social life and hobbies?
5. Do you work? If so, how has work impacted your transition at [institution]?

View of Self as a Community College Transfer Student:

1. Looking back on your transition to [institution], do you wish you would have done anything differently?
2. How do you feel being a transfer student will impact your college experience at [institution]?
3. Do you think being a transfer student provides any advantages that students who started at [institution] do not have?
4. Do you think being a transfer student provides any limitations on you in any ways?
5. Do you think being a transfer student will help you or hinder you in any ways in your future career path?

Strategies Implemented by Community College Transfer Students:

1. What strategies have you engaged in throughout your transition?
 - a. Were any of these particularly useful?
 - b. Were there any strategies that you found to be ineffective?
 - c. Do you feel that students who started here at [institution] have used different strategies in navigating the university in comparison to yourself?
 - d. Did you have to adjust any roles, or assume any new roles, as you transferred?
 - i. How have you changed roles since transitioning to [institution]?
 - ii. Did you give up/leave behind any roles you had while attending your community college? What did this mean for you?
 - iii. How has your life been different since you transferred?
 - e. In looking back as your transition, is there anything you wish you would have done differently?

Final Questions:

1. Overall, how would you describe your experience at [institution] so far and the transition you have had in coming to [institution]?
2. Is there anything that I did not ask about your transition while being here at [institution] that you would like me to know?

Third Interview

Interview Overview (repeated each time):

Name: _____

Date, Time, and Location: _____

Other Observations: _____

Interview Purpose:

1. To clarify any gaps in information identified over the past two interviews.
2. To follow up on any information and topics left unanswered.

Interview Procedure:

Before the interview: Ask the participant for permission to tape record the interview. Set up a time that allows for the interview to go long if need be. Set up a place that is quiet with minimal distractions and convenient to the participant, such as a study lounge within the library, an office on campus, or other similar location within the [institution] campus.

1. Welcome participant and thank them for their continued participation.
2. Explain the interview process for the third interview.
 - a. The interview will take approximately one-hour.
 - b. The conversation will be kept confidential.
3. Clarify and review if they have any questions about the study.

4. Begin interview.
 - a. Before starting the discussion, ask whether they had anything they wanted to clarify from the second interview with regards to any of their responses.
5. At end of interview, stop recorder.
6. Thank participant. Inform them that you will provide a copy of the transcript for their review and solicit any feedback at one point before the final review of data is complete.

Potential Questions/Topics:

1. Discuss themes and categories that emerged as a result of analyzing the data and interpreting concepts and themes from the first two interviews.
 - a. Do these themes seem to make sense?
 - b. Do you feel the overall account is accurate?
2. Were there other events, experiences, or meanings that we have not previously discussed?
3. Follow-Up: Ask remaining questions that arose from the previous interview.
4. We have discussed many areas relating to your experience as a transfer student. As you have reflected on your experience, looking back, what meaning has this transition had for you?
5. How was this interview experience for you?
6. Do you feel there is something that I should have asked but didn't?
7. Do you have any questions for me?